

September 6, 2020

Matthew 18:7-9

“The Seriousness of Sin”

Pilgrim Lutheran Church
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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

The California cobra lily is a devious plant and certainly no flower. One can even say that it is insidious as it appears to know the way in which an insect thinks in order to devour it. The way in which it lures the insect in and convinces the insect to make all the wrong decisions is rather eerie.

Insects are attracted to the California cobra lily because they think it is a flower. On what appears to be leafy fronds on the plant there is a lot of tasty nectar. The insects eat the nectar and as they browse around they ultimately climb around to the underside of the plant where they find themselves in a big chamber and can't figure how to get out. At the top of the chamber is what appears to be an arrangement of illuminated windows that causes an insect to become terribly disoriented. The insect runs back and forth until it makes a big mistake and drops down into a descending tube with downward hairs that ensure that the insect cannot go back up. The insect ultimately drowns in the fluid down at the bottom and, in a rather interesting process, it is finally digested. What was sweet nectar to the insect is a death-trap!

In our gospel lesson for this morning it's as if this unbelieving world has planted California cobra lilies everywhere they possibly can for all those who trust in Jesus for the forgiveness of sins. It cannot be tolerated that the children of the heavenly Father be allowed to live in the peace that passes all understanding, and the anticipation of something better than what is down here. Those who practice sin want others to practice sin with them. Consequently, the children of the heavenly Father must be enticed by the sweet nectar of sin. They must be brought to the chamber and be distracted by the lighted windows to become disoriented and led down a descending tube into the gut of death and hell - drowned and absorbed by the promises of good things when there is nothing but the great loss of God's love in Jesus. This brings us to **The Seriousness of Sin**.

Being a disciple of our Savior is no easy thing for us as we are easily enticed by our sinful flesh to the sweet nectar of what is wrong. It appears to be quite satisfying until you realize that you have been fooled and are now trapped. Because of the devious and insidious nature of this unbelieving world, they are sentenced to, as Jesus puts it: "Woe!" The expression is not simply an accusation, nor is it merely an expression of sorrow. Rather, the whole unbelieving world is sentenced to remain outside the kingdom, those who, as Paul writes, "... know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them (Rom. 1:32)."

Like every generation of Christian we live with those who want us to conform to the sweet nectar of wicked ways. Solomon uses a woman as a picture of spiritual adultery. He writes: "The woman Folly is loud; she is seductive and knows nothing." To those who are going straight on their way she cries out to them to enter into her inviting house with her secret delicacies. Solomon adds: "... the dead are there, her guests are in the depths of hell (Prov. 9:18)." Why is it that we are even slightly attracted to the sweet nectar or the sweet words of the woman Folly is just astonishing, especially when one considers how much Jesus loves us and all that he has done. Still, we do carry with us the sinful flesh, and that is why we are warned. In another place it is said by our Lord and Savior, "Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak (Matt. 26:41)."

As you can see, sin is a serious matter for everyone, whether you are the one enticing or the one being enticed. Temptations or death-traps must come because unbelievers cannot leave us alone. It is in the fiber of their being to turn us away from Jesus whether they know it or not. That is why it is best for us to keep our distance from them. We cannot, nor should we hide ourselves from this unbelieving world, for we are bid to testify to the truth, but we also need to realize that we are much more likely to follow after them because of our sinful flesh than they are to follow after us in Christ. This is part of the reason why Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 6:14, “Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness?”

Jesus is warning us in our gospel text about the death-trap. The point of contact between the deceptively sweet nectar that leads to death is in our own inclination to self-love and the broad and easy road to self-satisfaction, rather than the intense work required in doing what is right. Let’s face it, to do what is right requires the death or the cutting off of our desire to do what is wrong, and that is no fun. The death or cutting off of what we want is no easy matter by any stretch of the imagination. Consider the words of our Lord: “And if your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into the hell of fire.”

To begin with, let’s get rid of the ridiculous notion that Jesus is literally saying to cut off your hand or foot and tear out your eye. He isn’t saying that. Cutting off a hand or foot leaves a second hand or foot that will do just as much damage as the one you just got rid of. Tearing out one eye will leave the other eye that will be able to see just as much as the other. Jesus is not talking literally here. He is talking spiritually about the things that we desire and want to run to and touch and take with our hand. What we see and run to and touch and take will reach into our inner being and have an effect on our connection to Jesus and the forgiveness of sins. So, not only do we see **The Seriousness of Sin** in our text, but we also should begin to see **The Seriousness of Salvation**. The gift that we have in Jesus cannot be compared to what we might gain from the woman Folly. Really, there is no gain from Folly but only loss.

Now, having said that, cutting off a hand or a foot and tearing out an eye is designed to give us a sobering understanding of what it means to say “no” to sin. The death of what we want, that is contrary to what God wants, is no easy “walk in the park.” No one wants to go through it. Nevertheless, it is part of the Christian life if we would remain children of our heavenly Father. Watching and praying is what Jesus warns us to do in the face of a hand or foot or eye that wants to do things that are spiritually devastating. To “watch and pray” teaches us where we are to fix our eyes and to embrace the help we need to overcome the California cobra plant of this unbelieving world. May God give us strength through his Son by the power of the Holy Spirit to consistently watch and pray when tempted.

So what does it mean to “watch and pray?” To “watch” means to embrace and live in one’s identity given in baptism, which is ongoing repentance, that is, seeing what sin really is, to confess it, to abhor it and be terrified of its consequence, and to rise up in the love and forgiveness of Jesus that wells up into an anticipation of what is greater in his kingdom. Faith is the God-given instrument through which we receive

all the gospel treasures earned for us through the sufferings and death of Jesus our Savior. Faith is exercised and strengthened when we daily face the death-traps of this unbelieving world and cut off our spiritual hands, feet, and eyes that would lead us astray. Faith sees the love and forgiveness of Christ and painfully cuts off whatever would separate us from that great love. Wherever there is faith there is transformation. However, transformation will never be full and final in this life. It does not happen by our love for Jesus but by his love for us. By the power of his love and good Spirit, we set our minds not on the things below, but on the Gospel pardon and the hope of what is to come. This is what keeps us out of the spiritual California cobra lily, or the woman Folly. Jesus is wisdom and our soul-mate.

Now that we know what it means to watch, why should we pray? Prayer is an act whereby we acknowledge our complete inability to do anything and total reliance upon the only God who saves and speaks to us in Scripture. Apart from him we are nothing. "Our help comes in the name of the Lord." When we come to our Lord for help, our inner being is turned away from burning desires to the one who is the true and good desire - to the Lord who is the Good one and from whom are all good things. He is eternal life and the true fulfillment for body and soul. Only he can save us from the spiritual California cobra lily.

I pray that you can now see. **The Seriousness of Sin** can only be dealt with by **The Seriousness of Salvation**. Jesus died for sin to deliver us from sin. He freed us from sin, death, and hell not so that we can love it and sin all the more. Instead, the forgiveness of sins is the real power at work in our lives. It is the very real and true love of the one who made us. The Lord of life has entered into this world of death to bring life. So, there is a struggle between the two that has eternal consequences. Christ has won the victory, and only in his love and forgiveness do we win with him.

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott

Predatory Plants: Lure of the Cobra Lily
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TJpC05V2EaE>